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GRASS ROOTS CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT.

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THE EXPRESSED DESIRE OF NEWARK LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS FOR PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT AND SHAPING LED TO THE FRAMING OF A QUESTIONNAIRE TO GIVE TEACHERS A MEANS OF EVALUATING LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAMS AND OF SUGGESTING IMPROVEMENTS. AN ANALYSIS OF THEIR RESPONSES IDENTIFIED "CLEARLY EMERGING NEEDS" FOR--(1) A SOUND PHILOSOPHY ON WHICH TO BASE THE CONTENT OF LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAMS, (2) EXPRESSLY-STATED SEQUENTIAL MINIMUM EXPECTANCIES, (3) CAREFULLY CONSIDERED INNOVATIVE PROCEDURES, (4) A PROGRAM OF DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION, (5) SOME PROCEDURE FOR CONTINUING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND A SYSTEM OF INTRADISTRICT COMMUNICATION, AND (6) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IN-SERVICE TRAINING, TEACHING AIDS, AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS. THESE NEEDS BECAME THE FOCUS OF A SUMMER WORKSHOP IN WHICH 16 ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY TEACHERS AND FIVE PRINCIPAL-ADVISERS DEVELOPED GUIDELINES OF MINIMUM EXPECTANCIES FOR A SEQUENTIAL LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM, GRADES 1-12, BASED UPON A STATE PHILOSOPHY, A CONSIDERATION OF SOCIETAL EFFECTS ON THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM, AND NEW TRENDS IN THE DISCIPLINE. THIRTY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THESE GUIDELINES INCLUDED ESTABLISHMENT OF A PERMANENT DISTRICT LANGUAGE ARTS COMMITTEE, PROVISION FOR SPECIAL TEACHER WORKDAYS, AND A YEAR-END ASSESSMENT BY TEACHERS OF THEIR UTILIZATION OF THE GUIDELINES. (SEE ALSO TE 000 140.) THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "DELAWARE ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 2, NO. 1, SPRING 1967. (RD)

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SPRING 1967

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Grass Roots Curriculum Improvement

IF ENGLISH TEACHERS are completely honest about it, we probably will be the first to admit that a proposal to develop a set of curriculum guidelines is likely to provoke a variety of responses, very few of which would be listed in any proper educational catechism. True, some of the responses might appear to be characterized by that faint glimmer of hope that bravely stirs the more optimistic of our ranks. Most reactions, however, would be generated by the kind of tired futility that all too often defeats any effort to construct curriculum before it even leaves the ground.

Judging from the sounds emanating from teacher lounges, from work sessions, and from the usual teacher conclaves, the reasons for this particular type of professional lethargy are twofold. First, there is a strong feeling—both critical and, we suspect, wryly guilty—that any forward thrust in the field of curriculum building is administratively directed, as distinguished from a grass-roots recognition of curriculum needs by the teachers themselves. A second feeling, somewhat more valid, perhaps, is that the best-made curricular plans of administrators and teachers "gang aft aglae" and slip into oblivion, or into file 13, simply because of lack of implementation.

All this is not to imply that administration has no effective role to play in curriculum considerations. It has not only a role, but a basic responsibility both to make possible and to implement the results of curriculum development. At the same time, however, it is the classroom teacher, the one who actually chisels and hones the curriculum into a working tool on a daily, practical basis, who is in a position to play the most effective role in shaping that curriculum.

Politicians, a breed noted for a practicality as sound as it is wily, have long depended upon the grass-roots enthusiasm of their constituents to keep alive their structure. This same grass-roots enthusiasm can do no less for the educational structure, especially when it comes to matters of curriculum. At least this is the conclusion that most of the English Language Arts teachers at the Newark Special School District have reached.

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The fact that last summer we held a workshop in English is not, in itself, conclusive. Actually, we do not expect to know for quite some time exactly how effective our work was. We think, however, that the background to the workshop is interesting as an example of a grass-roots recognition of certain English curriculum needs, a recognition that sprouted until it involved, at least indirectly, practically every one of the English Language Arts teachers in our fifteen elementary and secondary schools. The most tangible, but by no means the most significant, result of the entire development has been the printing of a manual of guidelines, grades 1-12. For these guidelines we make no claims other than the fact that they represent the cooperative efforts of a group of classroom teachers and principal-advisors from every grade level to determine meaningful organization of content for the students in our District.

The first seed was sown at a professional workday discussion held last March. At that time a group of teachers, later described almost wistfully by one principal as "the most direct and outspoken group of English teachers" he had listened to in some time, brainstormed the needs of our English program. They articulated a strong desire to become more personally involved in matters of English curriculum planning and expectancies. They indicated not only a genuine wish to help shape the Language Arts program, but also a keen sense of what a realistic program should include. Most important, they translated their ideas into action by rolling up their sleeves and getting to work.

First, from the original group a planning committee was named to work with me, in my capacity as District English Coordinator. This committee immediately framed a simple questionnaire, which was sent to every English Language Arts teacher in the District. The questions were simple, designed to give all teachers an opportunity to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of our program, and to write recommendations for making it the kind of curriculum with which they would be professionally satisfied to work.

When the results came in, the planning committee tackled the job of reading, analyzing, and categorizing the answers, concentrating on the weaknesses and the recommendations. Remarkably, practically every answer fitted into one of six clearly emerging needs: a need of a sound philosophy on which to base the content of the English Language Arts Program; a need of expressly stated sequential minimum expectancies, 1-12; a need of some carefully considered innovative pro-

cedures; a need of a program of developmental composition, 1-12; a need of some procedure for a continuing assessment of the program and for a system of intradistrict communications; a need of a set of recommendations for such specifics as in-service training, teaching aids, and instructional materials.

When this phase of the work was completed, the planning committee agreed on two specific recommendations for long-range planning. These recommendations, while emphasizing the willingness of teachers to bend to the oar, scored at the same time the realistic needs of time and a reasonable budget. These three ingredients – teacher effort, time, and money – seem to constitute some special kind of educational truism, yet anyone engaged in our profession agrees that they are the basic ingredients that make the educational cake rise.

Knowing also that half a loaf is better than none, however, we kept our recommendations as modest as possible. We requested some released time for at least part of a series of teacher work sessions to be written into the District calendar. We also recommended a summer workshop, with recompense for the participants and for secretarial assistance, to establish minimum expectancies and suggested activities, grades 1-12.

Official approval was granted by Dr. George V. Kirk, Assistant Superintendent, with special advice and guidelines determined by the District Curriculum Design Committee, which heard the plans for a summer workshop.

With a modest budget and instructions to secure a group of fourteen teachers, the next step was that of recruiting. In one sense, the task was simple in that we had more applicants than we could handle. Selecting the members, on the other hand, was difficult because we were determined to include representatives from every teaching level and from every one of the fifteen schools in our District. When Dr. Kirk, appreciative of the problem, approved enlarging the group to sixteen members, we felt that we were on our way. To this group were invited five principals as advisors – three elementary, one junior high, and one senior high.

So far, so good. We had our workshop personnel selected. Our basic purpose was to determine sequential minimum expectancies. At the same time, we were committed to make recommendations to solve the weaknesses identified by the rank and file of our English Language

Arts teachers, as well as to lay the groundwork for some long-range planning.

Although our budget was limited and the time restricted, we stretched each to its extreme. The workshop met each day from 8:00 to 12:30, for two weeks. Obviously, to complete the task, many of the participants met in the afternoons and worked in the evenings.

Before resolving the core of the assignment, the entire group agreed that our English curriculum first needed a clearly stated philosophy against which to measure its expectancies. Also basic to our program, in the opinion of the participants, was a consideration of the political, economic, and technological aspects of our society affecting a realistic English curriculum. Finally, some of the new trends in English were identified. Against these considerations, the participants established sequential minimum expectancies.

Before the workshop ajdourned, the members made amply clear how significant they considered the need of implementing their program. To this end they secured Dr. Kirk's endorsement that the guidelines they had developed would be followed. At the end of this year all teachers will be asked for their assessment, based upon notes kept on pages included in the manual for that purpose.

As a specific aid to implementing the guidelines, the workshop made 30 recommendations. One of the most basic, that of a permanent District English Language Arts Committee with a rotating membership, already is proving a forceful factor.

As a further help, the teacher workdays written into this year's District calendar have been designated for further implementing, for putting a little meat onto what, after all, was indicated as merely guidelines. With an ongoing evaluation, with work sessions geared to developing a fuller program, and with a District English Language Arts Committee, steps thus have been taken to insure implementation.

From grass roots to implementation, teacher involvement appears to be the wave on which our English Language Arts Curriculum will roll or crash. With the kind of professional enthusiasm that inevitably comes from teacher involvment, we have the strongest possible argument for success. In any case, those of us who are involved in our English curriculum react with understandably grim humor to those voices that would have us believe that curriculum is not the business of the classroom teacher. We think it is — unless, of course, we ever are shortsighted enough to relinquish it by default.